

Mississippi Sandhill Crane

National Wildlife Refuge

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1975.
- Acres: 20,000, Jackson County, three major units (Ocean Springs 9,000, Gautier 9,000 and Fontainebleau 2,000).
- Other management: FMHA tracts and conservation easements equal 2,500 acres.
- Location: the headquarters/visitor's center is located one-half mile north of I-10, exit 61, on the Gautier-Vancleave Road.

Natural History

- Refuge occupies 20,000 acres of pine/savanna habitat interspersed with bayheads, cypress, rivers and marsh in the coastal plain of Mississippi.
- Approximately 100 endangered Sandhill cranes inhabit the refuge.
- Other wildlife includes deer, fox, bobcat, raccoon, neo-tropical migrants, raptors, wading birds, reptiles and amphibians.
- Much of the refuge is encompassed by pine/savanna habitat. Water bodies such as Perigal Bayou, Old Fort Bayou, Bayou Castelle and Bluff Creek flow through various units of the refuge.

Financial Impact of the Refuge

- 11 permanent staff members.
- Approximately 2500 visitors annually.
- Numerous local schools utilize refuge for educational purposes.
- Current budget (FY 98) \$827,900.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide habitat and protection for endangered Mississippi Sandhill cranes.

- Protect and preserve unique and highly diverse savanna plant communities utilized by cranes.
- Provide environmental education, interpretation and wildlife-oriented recreation to refuge visitors.

Management Tools

- Crane recovery-population monitoring, egg switching, captive bird releases, predator control, and law enforcement.
- Habitat restoration.
- Prescribed burning.
- Mechanical vegetation manipulation.
- Noxious plant management.
- Wildland fire suppression assistance to state and local agencies.
- Education/interpretation.

Public Use Opportunities

- 3/4-mile nature trail.
- Wildlife exhibits/video.
- Slide show.
- Wildlife observation.
- Observation blinds.
- Photography.

Calendar of Events

March: Gautier Crane Festival.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

Questions and Answers

Why are Mississippi Sandhill cranes an endangered species in Mississippi and they are hunted in Texas?

The Mississippi Sandhill crane is a separate and distinct subspecies which is non-migratory and on the brink of extinction. There were only 30 to 40 cranes left in the 1950's and 1960's. Now the free flying population is around 100. The subspecies in Texas is migratory and sustains a huntable population level.

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Why is hunting not allowed on the refuge?

Authorizing legislation in establishing the refuge specifically states recovery of endangered species as the primary purpose of the refuge. All other uses must be compatible with that purpose.

What is the primary purpose of the Mississippi Sandhill Crane Refuge?

The primary purpose of the refuge is to restore crane habitat, protect the cranes and their habitat from disturbance, and provide information, education, and wildlife observation opportunities to refuge visitors and members of the community.

What good is this refuge for other than protecting endangered cranes?

In addition to protecting the highly endangered Mississippi Sandhill cranes, this refuge consists of highly productive habitats, i.e. pine savannas, bayhead forest, etc., that provide food, cover, and nesting opportunities for many other wildlife species of which some are threatened and endangered. In addition this refuge provides excellent public recreation and educational opportunities. A nature trail provides hiking, photography and wildlife observation. About 2,500 people visit the refuge each year. Local schools utilize the refuge for outdoor classrooms. Refuge personnel often speak to these groups about environmental matters.

Does the use of fire on the refuge harm wildlife?

Fire used in the right manner is a very valuable wildlife management tool. It plays an integral role in the recovery of the Sandhill crane by helping to restore and maintain the highly productive savanna habitats. Unique pitcher plant bog growth is greatly stimulated by fire. Controlled fires can convert low productive thick dead undergrowth into succulent green vegetation that is utilized by many wildlife species such as deer, turkey and rabbit. Management for other threatened and endangered species such as gopher tortoise and red-cockaded woodpeckers is largely achieved with fire.